

Uniting the U.S. (and US 20) with art

Sal Strom is creating a mobile, interactive art project that will touch hundreds from sea to shining sea



BARBARA SHERMAN - Lynn Moyers and Sal Strom hold up a map of the U.S. encased in colored cheesecloth with Highway 20 marked on it that they will traverse next year connecting communities with art.

King City artist Sal Strom has produced some unique pieces of art during her career but none as big as her current GIGANTIC project that literally will stretch from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean.

Strom is turning U.S. Route 20, an east-west highway between Newport, Ore., and Boston, Mass., into an art project. The highway, which runs for 3,365 miles, is not as well known as its cousin, Route 66, but it is the longest continuously numbered road in the U.S. passing through 12 states.

Calling the project "Connecting US 20," Strom and her partner Lynn Moyers will leave Kenmore Square in Boston on May 1, 2017, and plan to arrive in Newport, Ore., on May 31, 2017, creating a 3,000-plus-mile art project.

"We plan to connect communities along this highway using art as the catalyst for linking communities from Boston to Newport using quirky 'colorful joy,'" Strom said.

Moyers added, "We will focus mostly on small towns with art centers. We will contact them ahead of time, so they will be ready for us. There is a lot of interest in this, and we are casting a wide net. This is as much about culture as it is about community."

In preparation for the trip, the garage of the home Strom shares with Moyers has pretty much been taken over by swathes of colorful cheesecloth.

For the traveling art, Strom took 2-foot-by-4-foot maps of each of the states along Highway 20 and swathed them in layers of pastel-colored cheesecloth and also "cheese-clothed" a 72-inch-long map of the U.S. with Highway 20 outlined on it.

"These flowing hangings will be displayed on the outside of our van as we drive through and stop in each state," Strom said. "Each place we stop, we will hang the 72-inch art piece showing the entire route as well as the state we are traveling in at the time. Elements of the weather will be evident in the work."

Traveling in a modified van will be team leader Strom; and Trisha Farmer and Kim Shepard, who will orchestrate the community art projects, while Moyers will serve as the 'TechnoDoc' who will post a daily blog and keep the creative types on schedule and on track.

Another element will be provided by Portland producer and composer Alan Alexander III, who is creating a theme song for the journey, which "will be played loudly as we roll into town, along the way, and during activities," Strom said.

"Our spiritual collaborator was one of the best promoters of community ever. She was Amazing Gracie. Her quirky joy and zest for living was contagious. Gracie was the owner of the world famous Sea Hag and my mom."

(Gracie Strom and her husband Dick moved to Depoe Bay in 1963 with their three children to become the owners of the Sea Hag restaurant/bar. Gracie realized they needed a gimmick to keep customers coming during the winter months when few tourists came to town, so she started "banging the bottles."

She taught herself to create different sounds on the liquor bottles with spoons, embellishing the music with whistles and horns, cow bells and even a kazoo. In addition to being a popular place with customers, the Sea Hag became a community center for local residents.

After Dick died in 1968, Gracie bought the building and later other real estate, joined a bank board of directors and was elected to the sewer board.

In 2002, Gracie married again and finally sold the Sea Hag in 2007, although she returned every Saturday afternoon to bang the bottles; she and her husband lived in a condo overlooking Newport Bay until she died last year.)

Meanwhile, the plans for the great road trip are progressing, according to Strom.

"In each town we visit, we will create childlike play events using materials we will provide," she said.

In addition, the full name of the project is "Connecting US 20 One Safety Pin at a Time," and going along with that theme, individual "tropical" necklaces will be one of the visual links in each community they visit.

Beginning with Newport, "connecting pin parties" will be held, and "the strands of pins from these parties will be taken to Boston where our project begins," Strom said. "In Boston we will have twice as many made, bringing half back to Newport. The other half will be shared with the next town we stop at on US 20.

"Each visited town on the route will do the same: Create necklaces made from mini tropical safety pins to share with the next town. Each stop on US 20 will have a tangible connection to the previous town and the project. This will continue from Boston to Newport."

Also, the maps she is decorating at home have Route 20 marked with strings of safety pins. "I've spent so much money on safety pins," Strom said.



BARBARA SHERMAN - Sal Strom works on a stack of cheese-clothed maps of the states along Highway 20 that will be part of her traveling art project.

Another artwork opportunity on the trip will provide local collaborators with colorful materials for temporary installations to be photographed and videoed.

And making a human chain, participants will hand off a bucket draped with cheesecloth to the next person, in the manner of a bucket brigade, which will be documented by an ever-growing video from state to state.

"Photographs will be printed onsite with a small portable Polaroid printer," Strom said. "These photo collages will be shown at the end of each day's event in a mini-exhibition with scenes from the town in the background.

"They will also be included in a fall traveling exhibit. Each state will be represented as we document the project."



COURTESY OF SAL STROM - This photo from the Connecting US 20 website shows one example of Sal Strom's colorful cheesecloth turned into bucket bouquets.

As they travel from the Atlantic to the Pacific, they will post daily blogs as they document their surroundings and events of the art project. Photographs and 15-second videos will be uploaded to Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

"And we will be encouraging people to upload photos and videos from their smart phones or tablets," Strom said. "We also want to do presentations about this before and after the trip."

Presentations will be made in Washington, Multnomah and Clackamas counties, and Strom and Moyers hope to travel Route 20 in reverse to give the presentation to those who contributed to it along the way.

Strom pointed out that "it's a good thing we waited until now because we can take video on our iPhones, which is better than hauling around video equipment," and Moyers added, "We will only use iPhones and iPads."

Strom reported that she was stumped when a gallery owner recently asked her what kind of art she does, and after thinking it over, she came up with her art medium as "interdisciplinary with a focus on social practice."

She said of the nationwide art project that "I've just never been this excited for an art-related anything. It's a huge project. This is my gift to my mom."

Strom pointed out that they are not asking for money from people; instead, they are applying for grants to fund the project.

For more information, visit connectingUS20.com.